

# Autism for Family Members

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Competencies for this module are:

As a result of completion of this module, the participant will be able to:

- Identify techniques to help encourage desirable behaviors
- Explain how to use the discrete-trial teaching method to encourage desirable behaviors

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Terminology

Like most fields, applied behavior analysis has developed its own specialized vocabulary or "jargon" that allows professionals to communicate ideas quickly and concisely. However, the dictionary lists "unintelligible talk" among the definitions of jargon. As you read the following modules, try not to let the terminology frighten you. Although it may seem complex, it actually describes very basic aspects of human behavior.

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Reinforcement

Effective use of reinforcement is essential to ensuring the success of teaching an individual with Autism. Positive reinforcement is utilized to motivate the individual to continue to perform and respond with the desired response. Reinforcement is any act that increases the likelihood that a behavior will occur again. Primary and secondary reinforcers are utilized when teaching persons with Autism.

- **Primary reinforcers** are unconditioned, natural, life-sustaining factors such as food, drinks, and warmth. Examples of primary reinforcers used for teaching students with Autism can include grapes, pretzels, candy, juice, and water.

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Reinforcement (continued)

- **Secondary reinforcers** are conditioned, learned reinforcers. These can be Social, Token, or Activity reinforcers.
  - Social reinforcers may include praise, a smile, a handshake, a hug, or high five.
  - [Token reinforcers](#) are points, coins, chips, etc., that are redeemable for other, tangible reinforcers.
  - Activity reinforcers may include playing a game, listening to music, or taking a break.

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## Effective Reinforcement

Effective reinforcement is unique to each person with Autism. Reinforcement is dynamic in that it can change based upon simple environmental factors. For example, pretzels are clearly identified as an effective reinforcer for a student; that is, data has shown that when the student is given a piece of a pretzel for a correct response, his/her correct responses increase.

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## Effective Reinforcement (continued)

The individual has just had a big lunch that included a bag of pretzels. During the teaching session directly following lunch, pretzels may not be a true reinforcer. It is also important that in the early stages of teaching your family member with Autism the tangible reward be given to them immediately followed by a social reinforcer (praise). The consistent pairing of the tangible reward with the social praise increases the likelihood that social praise will have the reinforcement qualities of the tangible reinforcer.

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## What is a Reinforcer?

To reinforce means to "strengthen;" therefore, a [reinforcer](#) is something that "strengthens" a behavior. If John's mother gives him a cookie every time he puts his toys away without being asked *and* John puts his toys away more and more often without being asked, then that cookie is a reinforcer. Giving John the cookie strengthens the behavior of putting his toys away without being asked.



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## What is a Reinforcer? (continued)

However, if John's mother gives him a cookie every time he puts his toys away without being asked and John *does not* put his toys away more often, the cookie is *not a* reinforcer because the presentation of the cookie is not strengthening John's behavior.

This example illustrates two important principles of reinforcement:

1. Something can be considered as a reinforcer *if and only if* consistent presentation causes the behavior to occur again.
2. There are no "universal" reinforcers.

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## Using Different Reinforcers

Most adults would assume that a cookie would be reinforcing to a young child. And most children do like cookies. However, some do not, and the chance to earn a cookie by performing a certain behavior would not motivate them. These children might prefer potato chips, popcorn, or even Brussel sprouts. Food is not a universal reinforcer either, and other children may prefer earning activities, such as being tickled or looking out a window.

And still others may be motivated by objects or activities that you might find unappealing or unpleasant—loud music or being left alone in their rooms, for example. The only way to determine if something is a reinforcer is to use it in a teaching situation and observe if your family member's behavior increases, decreases, or remains the same.

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## Is this Just Bribery?

Many people feel that offering a family member rewards for completing certain tasks is a form of bribery. They may feel that their family member should listen to them "because I said so," or that their family member should complete tasks for his or her own sense of pride and accomplishment. It is important to remember, however, that people with Autism have a social deficit.

And due to this deficit, factors that motivate other people (a parent's pride, wanting to be like an older brother or sister, a sense of "I did it!") are often not motivating to the individual with Autism. When you first begin to work with your family member, you will need to use rewards that are highly desired. However, your family member can also be taught to value more normal, social rewards such as praise and accomplishment; this technique is discussed below.

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## Types of Reinforcers

Reinforcers fall into two categories: primary and secondary. **Primary reinforcers** are unlearned; that is, they are naturally reinforcing to you. If you were hungry, for example, food would be a primary reinforcer; if you were thirsty, something to drink would be a primary reinforcer. All reinforcers other than food, drink, and basic necessities are considered secondary reinforcers. **Secondary reinforcers** can be activities (watching a video, listening to music, taking a break), toys, social contact (kisses, hugs, tickles, praise, smiles) or tokens. Tokens are items which are not naturally reinforcing, but become reinforcing because they are consistently paired with primary or previously established reinforcers.

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## **Types of Reinforcers (continued)**

Money, for example, is not naturally reinforcing, but experience has taught you that it can be traded for items that are. Money then takes on the reinforcing quality of those items, and as a result, you are motivated to work for money. And sometimes, tasks become intrinsically reinforcing. You may enjoy a task for its own sake, or feel proud because you have accomplished something.

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## Highly-Preferred Reinforcers

When you first begin teaching your family member, you will want to use highly preferred reinforcers—things your family member really wants and will work very hard to get. Most likely, these highly preferred reinforcers will be primary reinforcers or tangible secondary reinforcers. However, you can also teach your family member to value social reinforcers by consistently pairing them with his or her highly preferred reinforcers.

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Highly-Preferred Reinforcers (continued)

For example, if you tell your family member to get dressed and he or she does, you might say "Great getting dressed!" (a social reinforcer) and then give him or her a highly preferred reinforcer (a ride on dad's shoulders). If you always present a social reinforcer immediately before a primary or secondary reinforcer, the social reinforcer will take on the pleasurable properties of the preferred reinforcer. Through this system of pairing, children and young adults can learn to value reinforcers that are more normal and more natural, such as praise, hugs and kisses, and (for young adults) money and accomplishment.

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Changing Likes and Dislikes

Everyone's likes and dislikes will change periodically, even over the course of a day. While your family member may work very hard to earn potato chips before lunch, he or she may not be willing to work for them after lunch, when he or she is full. For this reason it is always important to have a "pool" of reinforcers for your family member to earn. Having a fairly large number and a good variety of foods, activities, and items will help ensure that your family member doesn't grow bored or tired of previously favorite things. The following exercise will help you to develop this pool.



# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Developing a “Pool” of Reinforcers

The following is an exercise we believe will benefit you. Either on a piece of paper or on a computer, list ten items that might be reinforcers for your family member. Try to choose five primary and five secondary reinforcers. Then, ask another person close to your family member (sibling, grandparent, teacher, etc.) to do so. Do your lists agree?

A useful tool for assisting this process, is a “Reinforcement Inventory”. A Reinforcement Inventory is a comprehensive list of categorized items that are rated as being something the person likes or dislikes. An example of such a document can be downloaded from the digital library and printed out for your use.

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## Using Reinforcement for Teaching Purposes

The easiest way to use reinforcement to teach your family member is to "catch them being good." If you ask him or her to do a task and he or she does, **REINFORCE!** If you notice your family member playing quietly or engaged in some other appropriate behavior, **REINFORCE!** It is very easy to fall into the trap of paying the most attention to your family member when he or she is misbehaving—people who are being good do not demand nearly as much attention. But by "catching" your family member when he or she is following directions or just "being good," you will teach that appropriate behavior gets him or her the things that he or she wants. And as a result, you will see more and more appropriate behavior.

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Using Reinforcement for Teaching Purposes (continued)

The informal system of reinforcement described above is an excellent method for strengthening behaviors your family member already has. But reinforcement alone is insufficient for teaching your family member brand new behaviors—brushing his or her teeth, for example.

# Quiz 17

Question 1 of 4

Point Value: 10

This is a MATCHING DRAG and DROP question. Match the statements to the correct second half of the sentence by dragging your answer choice into the box with your mouse.

Place the label for the type of reinforcer with the picture that best describes that type.



Primary Reinforcers



Secondary Reinforcers

## PROPERTIES

On passing, 'Finish' button:

On failing, 'Finish' button:

Allow user to leave quiz:

User may view slides after quiz:

User may attempt quiz:

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[At any time](#)

[After attempting quiz](#)

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Properties...



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# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Discriminative Stimulus

Reinforcement is also one part of the teaching strategy called discrete-trial teaching that has been designed specifically to meet the learning characteristics of people with Autism. Below are the components of a *discrete trial* (one unit of teaching).

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Discriminative Stimulus (continued)

Some of these terms may be unfamiliar to you, but their definitions are very basic.

- 1. SD**—A discrete trial begins with an SD or discriminative stimulus. In simpler terms, it begins with the direction you want your family member to follow. For example, "Wash hands" would be the SD used if you were teaching hand washing; "get dressed" would be the SD used if you were teaching your family member to get dressed. Because language deficits are characteristic of people with Autism, the SD should be **clear, concise, and consistent**. Tell your family member exactly what you want him or her to do, use as few words as possible and use the same words each time you or anyone else works on this task.

# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Prompt

- 2. Prompt**—If you are teaching a brand new task to your family member, he or she may not attempt to respond to your SD. At this point, you will have to introduce a prompt. By prompting your family member, you are helping him or her build the connection between your verbal direction and the behavior you want him or her to do. There are several levels of prompting, including physical, gestural, and verbal. The type of prompt you will use will depend on your family member's level of ability and will be faded as he or she learns the task. (Prompting techniques will be explained more fully in the following section).

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## Consequence

**3. Consequence**—The consequence is *your* response to your family member's response. If your family member responds to your SD correctly, **REINFORCE!** (Remember, reinforcement will strengthen the new behavior you are teaching by motivating your family member to perform that behavior again). Always reinforce your family member *immediately* after he or she performs the behavior you are teaching so he or she understands exactly what behavior is being reinforced.



# Reinforcement And Teaching Techniques



## Reinforce

If your family member responds incorrectly, or does not respond at all (and remember, this will happen, especially if you are teaching a brand new task) ignore the incorrect response and begin the discrete trial again. It will be very tempting to tell your family member, "No, that's not right," or give him/her a "second chance." But because of your family member's difficulties understanding language and unique learning style, this type of feedback will only confuse him or her.

Give your SD again, and before your family member has a chance to respond incorrectly, *prompt* your family member to perform the correct response. Then, **REINFORCE!** This way, your family member has had the opportunity to "get it right" and to be reinforced. By consistently presenting SD, prompts, and reinforcers, your family member will learn what your verbal directions mean, and will perform these behaviors more and more often in order to earn a reinforcer.

# Quiz 18

Question 1 of 3

Point Value: 10

Read the following SCENARIO. At the end of the scenario, answer the question that follows then select the ONE best answer.

Teacher: "Touch red."

Student begins to move towards yellow card;

Teacher takes student's hand and touches the red card.

Teacher: "Good touching red," and records data on the data sheet.

In this scenario, what is the SD?

- The yellow card
- The teacher's praise "good touching red"
- The teacher's instruction "touch red"
- The red card

## PROPERTIES

On passing, 'Finish' button:

On failing, 'Finish' button:

Allow user to leave quiz:

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# Congratulations on Completing this Lesson



You have  
successfully unlocked  
the next lesson

